The Cult of the Euphrates and Its Significance among the Imāmī Shīʿa*

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The act of purification in the waters of the Euphrates is one of the ceremonies of the pilgrimage to the tomb of Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī[1] (killed in 61/680) in Karbalāʾ,[2] in particular on the Day of ʿĀshūrāʾ,[3] but also on other holidays[4] and even on regular weekdays. This act of purification in the river is

*) This is an expanded version of a paper given at the annual conference in memory of Prof. David Semah at Haifa University (June 3, 2003) held under the patronage of the Dept. of Arabic Language and Literature. I am indebted to the kindness of Prof. George Kanazi for his helpful comments on this article. The paper will discuss the cult of th Euphrates in Shīʿī religious prose literature. The cult of the Euphrates in Shīʿī poetry will be discussed in a separate paper in future.

1) For whom see L. Veccia Vaglieri, art. "al-Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib" in *EI²*, III (Leiden, 1986), 607–15.

2) For details on Karbalāʾ see E. Honigmann, art. "Karbalāʾ" in *EI²*, IV (Leiden, 1990), 637–39.

3) For details on ʿĀshūrāʾ, see my article "ʿĀshūrāʾ Day and Yom Kippur," *Ancient Near Eastern Studies* 38 (2001), 200–11; M. Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam* (The Hague, 1978).

4) The Shīʿīs make pilgrimages to Ḥusayn's grave every day of the year, but the important pilgrimages are: 1) the pilgrimage of the middle of the month of Shaʿbān; 2) the pilgrimage of the middle of the month of Rajab called *al-Ghafīla*; 3) the pilgrimage of the three last nights of the month of Ramadan, *Layāli l-Qadr* ("The Nights of the Decree"); 4) the pilgrimage of the two holidays of al-Fiṭr and ʿĪd al-Aḍḥā, the celebration of breaking the fast and the celebration of the sacrifice; 5) the pilgrimage of on *ʿArafa* Day (the ninth day of the month of Dhū l-Ḥijja; 6) the pilgrimage of ʿĀshūrāʾ on the tenth of Muḥarram, remembrance day for the killing of Ḥusayn. This pilgrimage is the most important of the pilgrimages we have noted; 7) the pilgrimage of Arabaʿīn (this pilgrimage takes place on the 20th day of Ṣafar every year; that is, forty days after ʿĀshūrāʾ, the day on which the head of Ḥusayn was returned from Damascus to Karbalāʾ and was buried beside his body. This is the origin of the pilgrimage's other name, *"Maradd al-Raʾs"* ["the pilgrim-

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the most important part of the pilgrimage ceremony, one that is performed by every visitor to Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī's tomb, in imitation of the Shīʿī Imāms and in response to their preachings, in particular those of the sixth Imām, Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq[5] (d. 148/765). The believers maintain that this immersion is conductive to health and purity, in addition to other virtues to be discussed below.

Many pilgrims to Ḥusayn's tomb put water from the Euphrates into flasks they have brought with them, and take it back to their homes in far-away lands as a remedy for illnesses of every kind and a charm that is sure to bring success and longevity. Some pour the water over their fields and orchards in order to bless them. Others used to sprinkle the water on their camels and/or horses on their way to and from the tomb.

In this paper I shall attempt to delineate the essence, the sources and the developmental stages of this cult among Imāmī Shīʿīs, which has become the main ceremony among the pilgrimage rites connected with Ḥusayn's tomb.

Water in Other Religions

The Shīʿī cult of the waters of the Euphrates is one of the many forms that the sanctification of water and of water sources takes in various religions around the world, pagan as well as monotheistic. The reason for this is that sources of water (springs, rivers, bountiful rain) are perceived as what makes life possible and thus as expressing eternity, longevity, creative energy, renovation, physical and spiritual purification, fertility, and the renewal of life.[6] The adoration that the Euphrates River has received, and the sanctity ascribed to it, should therefore come as no surprise.

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age of the Return of the Head (to the body for burial together).] See Jaʿfar b. Muḥammad b. Qulawayh, *Kāmil al-ziyārāt*, ed. ʿAbd al-Ḥusayn al-Amīnī al-Tabrīzī (Najaf, 1937), 184–85; ʿAbbās al-Qummi, *Mafātīḥ al-jinān* (Beirut, 1995) 474–504.

[5]) For whom see M. G. S. Hodgson, art. *"Djaʿfar al-Ṣādiḳ"* in *EI²*, II (Leiden, 1991), 374–75.

[6]) Eliade draws this conclusion based upon his important comparative study of various myths of ancient cultures. For details see M. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (London, 1958), 188; J. Rudhard, art. "Water" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, XV (1995), 350–58.

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In pagan religions the god is described as hovering over the water that gives birth to both gods and men.[7] And as mentioned above, water plays an important role in the monotheistic religions as well. Thus in the Biblical story of the Creation it is said that: "… the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters … And God said Let there be an expanse between the waters to separate water from water … God called the expanse 'sky'",[8] following which He made the land appear out of the water. In a similar vein many verses in the Qur'ān relate that God created all living things from water, and that His throne used to hover over the water.[9]

A widespread belief ascribes to water the power to purify the body of uncleanliness and the soul of sin. This is why water is so often used in various religious ceremonies of all faiths. Ritual immersion in water was of particular significance among members of certain Jewish sects toward the end of the Second Temple period.

In the Christian religion baptism, initially in the River Jordan and later also using water that had been blessed in a special sacrament, absolves the believer of Original Sin and symbolizes his or her official acceptance into the Church as a member of the Christian community. This act, performed with water, the sacred substance in which Jesus was baptized, traces Christ's path of death and rebirth and all that this implies.[10] Jesus' very first disciples already considered baptism one of their most important rites.

Christianity absorbed a number of pagan rites and sites connected with water deities whose statues and/or temples had been erected in the vicinity of water sources,[11] and these were then assimilated into the rites of Christianity. France, for example, possesses a large number of water sources that were sacred to the ancient pagan religions and that later be-

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7) As in the religions of the ancient Egyptians, Assyrians, and Hindus. For details see Eliade, *Patterns*, 189–91; M. Gaster, art. "Water" in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, XI (1951), 713.

8) Genesis, I:2.

9) Qur'ān LXXXVI, 6; XXV, 54; XXIV, 45; XXI, 30; XI, 7.

10) Eliade, *Patterns*, 196–97. It should be noted that for Paul, baptism is a symbol of the believer's death and rebirth. Likewise, it should be noted that the baptism of infants for ritual purposes is known outside of Christianity as well; for example among the Indians of Mexico.

11) For details on river deities see M. Gaster, art. "Water" in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, XI (1951), 704–19; *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (ed. Eliade), 425–28 art. "River".

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came Christianized. This was the case with the spring of Saint Sauveur in the Forest and Lake Andéol in the Aubrac Mountains.[12]

The British Isles also possess numerous natural wells that were considered sacred in antiquity; to this day they still attract pilgrims wishing to take advantage of their supposed therapeutic properties. Some of these sites have been adopted by the Church, which duly modified the rites conducted there and turned them into Christian places of worship.[13]

Of particular interest is the spring at Lourdes, in the Pyrenees of south-western France, whose story began in July 1858, when a girl named Bernadette claimed to have had a revelation of the Virgin by the spring. In 1862 the Roman Catholic Church declared her vision genuine; the spring was sanctified and its waters declared to possess therapeutic properties. As a result the place became a pilgrimage site visited by three million people annually, including invalids and other ill people who wished to immerse themselves in the healing waters.[14] In 1876 a church was constructed at the site for the believers.

From the earliest times man has evolved water ceremonies that played an important role both for himself and for his deities. In primitive times religious ceremonies were frequently held next to the sources of flowing water that ensured human survival, and that served as proof of the life-giving, dynamic, purifying and renewing force of water. Such water sources were at times even granted an independent religious status, with their own ceremonies unconnected to the main articles of faith of the religion in question.[15]

The inhabitants of India consider the River Ganges holy. Every Indian aspires to reach the river and immerse himself in it at least once, preferably toward the end of his or her life. Immersion in the river provides purification of the soul, and is conducted in four stages: first, external purification of the body, achieved by washing in the river; second, internal purification of the soul, produced by drinking river water, of which a symbolic amount of three spoonfuls is enough; third, a stage of personal

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[12]) Eliade brings many additional examples of water sources in France, Sardinia, Sicily and other places that were sanctified by Christianity and continued the tradition, sometimes by converting them to official, institutionalized cultic sites. For details see Eliade, *Patterns*, 200–201.

[13]) On the subject of holy springs and wells of the British Isles, see M. Freeman, *Sacred Waters, Holy Wells* (Parabola, 1995).

[14]) Lourdes: *Encyclopedia Britannica*, III (1979), 352.

[15]) G. Van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, trans. J. E. Turner (London, 1938), 60.

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communion with the gods through meditation, repetition of mantras and pranayama (breathing exercises); fourth, asking the waters of the river to serve as the family godhead. The most auspicious time for performing the immersion is dawn; when the energy of the day is united with the energy of the night, a strong combined energy thus supports the bather.[16]

The ancient Babylonians ceremoniously bathed the statue of the god Tammuz (something the Greeks did as well), in a belief that this act increased the power of the gods responsible for agriculture, fertility and rainfall. Water, the primary source of life, was thus of greater importance than the gods themselves.[17]

The Origins of the Name "Euphrates"

The Arabic name of the river, al-Furāt, is originally an adjective meaning "sweetest water". The word appears in the Qurʾān: "This sea, palatable, sweet *(furāt)* …".[18] The associated verb is *faruta* (imperfect: *yafrutu*) *al-mā*ʾ. Water that has become sweet is called *furāt*, "which is also the name of a famous river in the city of l-Kūfa in Iraq" which is how the lexicographer Ibn Manẓūr defines the word.[19]

In Akkadian the word *furāt* means water that has been driven back.[20]

Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, compiler of the *Muʿjam al-buldān*, a geographical encyclopedia, has this to say in his entry *furāt*: "The word has been arabicized from the Persian, in which it has a synonym, which means 'next to', since it is located next to the River Tigris". Yāqūt adds that the word in Arabic means "the sweetest water", adducing the above-mentioned Qurʾānic verse as evidence. He then goes on to describe the river's course, from its sources in Armenia down to its mouth in the Persian Gulf or, as he calls it, the Indian Sea. The river is 1480 miles (2330 km) long.[21]

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[16]) Raghubir Singh, *The Ganges* (New York, 1992); S. B. Chaphekar and G. N. Mhatre, *Human Impact on the Ganga River Ecosystem* (New Delhi, 1986). Also, http:///web.bryant.edu/~langlois/ecology/gangeshistory.htm.

[17]) Van der Leeuw, *Religion*, 195–97.

[18]) Qurʾān XXV, 53.

[19]) Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿarab* (Beirut, 1995), s. v. "f.r.t"

[20]) Jeremy Black, Andrew George, and Nichols Postgate eds., *A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian* (Wiesbaden, 2000), 279.

[21]) R. Hartman, art. "al-Furāt" in *EI*^{2}, II (Leiden, 1991) 946; Kamal Murīs Sharbil, *al-Mawsūʿa al-jughrafiyya i-l-waṭan al-ʿarabī* (Beirut, 1988), 406.

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Following these philological and geographical comments, Yāqūt, pursuing a practice common among Arab geographers, goes on to list the virtues of the river. The Euphrates is said to have many meritorious characteristics. It is claimed to be one of the four rivers emanating from the Garden of Eden, the other three being the Nile, Sīḥūn and Jīhūn. The caliph ʿAlī is quoted as saying: "Oh, people of al-Kūfa, your river (i.e. the Euphrates) has water coming from two spouts from the Garden of Eden that flow in it". In the name of ʿAbd al-Malik b. ʿUmayr it is related that the Euphrates is one of the rivers of the Garden of Eden, and had it not been contaminated by evil people any ill person bathing in it would be healed by God. The river is protected from disease by a guardian angel from the Garden of Eden.

It is related of the Imām Muḥammad al-Bāqir[22] (d. 114/732), the fifth Imām, that he drank water from the Euphrates, asking people to give him more and more, and then he praised God, saying: "The River Euphrates is greatly blessed. If people only knew how blessed it was they would construct domes on either bank and live in them, and if it were not for the unrighteous who immersed themselves in its water, any invalid washing in it would be healed".

In the name of al-Suddī[23] it is related that during the reign of ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib[24] (r. 36–41/656–61) the river rose and from its swelling water a large pomegranate merged and cut the bridge. The people took the pomegranate and opened it. The caliph then ordered the Muslims to share the pomegranate's seeds among themselves. The pomegranate was considered as having come from Paradise.

Yāqūt has this to say about the tradition: "This is a false tradition, since the fruits of the Garden of Eden are never to be found on earth". He then adds: "I have seen this tradition quoted in a number of books by scholars; otherwise I would not have permitted myself to quote it".[25]

One tradition quoted by Muslim claims: "The Day of Judgment will not come before the River Euphrates reveals a mountain made of gold over which the people will quarrel and all 199 men will come together to

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[22]) For whom see E. Kohlberg, art. "Muhammad b. ʿAlī Zayn al-ʿAbidīn" in *EI²*, VII (Leiden, 1993), 397–400.

[23]) For whom see Muḥammad b. ʿUmar al-Kashshī, *Rijāl al-Kashshī* (Mashhad, 1348/1929), 214 no. 1189; Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭūsī, *Rijāl al-Shaykh al-Ṭūsī* (Qumm, 1415/1994), 124 n. 1247.

[24]) For whom see H. A. R. Gibb, art. "ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib" in *EI²*, I (Leiden, 1986), 381–86.

[25]) Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Muʿjam al-buldān* (Beirut, 1979), IV, 242.

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ʿAlī b. ʾAbī ʿṬālib, and each will say to him: 'I shall be the one to possess this mountain'".[26]

From these traditions it is clear that the Euphrates was considered to be a river with many virtues: it originates in the Garden of Eden, its water has the power to heal the ill and the crippled, and God cast a pomegranate from the Garden of Eden into it (the latter tradition having been rejected by Yāqūt).

The Shīʿīs further developed these virtues, adding new ones as well. They raised the status of the river and that of its water, so much so that the water of the Euphrates was deemed to be equal, if not superior, in sanctity to that of Zamzam[27] (a sacred well near Mecca).

The Sanctity of Euphrates among the Imāmī Shīʿa

It would appear that the beginnings of the river's sanctity among Shīʿīs goes back to the period following the death of al-Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī in the year 661 at the hands of the Umayyads in the battle of Karbalāʾ and his burial there, near the stream of the Euphrates in southern Iraq. The Shīʿa thus came to regard the soil of Karbalāʾ as sacred, following the sadness and pain (*karb wa-balāʾ*, a play on the toponym Karbalāʾ) that they had experienced there.[28] Works were composed describing that event and the battle that preceded it.[29] In addition, since Karbalāʾ became a pil-

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[26]) Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Munʿim al-Ḥimyarī, *al-Rawḍ al-miʿtār fī akhbār al-aqṭār*, ed. Ihsān ʿAbbās, 2nd ed. (Beirut, 1984), 439.

[27]) For more on Zamzam see Ahmad Ghabin, "The Zamzam Ceremony and Its Importance in Islam", in Nahem Ilan, ed., *The Intertwined Worlds of Islam: Essays in Memory of Hava Lazarus-Yafe* (Jerusalem, 2002), 114–48 (in Hebrew). See also B. Carra de Vaux, art., "Zamzam" in *EI*^{2}, IV (1978), 1212–23; G. R. Hawting, "The Disappearance and Rediscovery of Zamzam and the Well of the Kaʿba," *BSOAS* 43 (1980), 44–54; Sāʿid Bakdāsh, *Faḍl māʾ Zamzam*, 2nd ed. (Beirut, 1994).

[28]) George Kanāzīʿ, "Karbalāʾ in Shīʿite Literature", *Al-Karmil* 13 (1993), 179–94. See also Ibn Babawayhi al-Qummī (Muḥammad b. ʿAlī b. al-Ḥusayn), *al-Amālī aw al-Majālis*, 5th ed. (Beirut, 1990), 111; Muḥammad Karīm Khān al-Karamānī, *Risāla fī l-maqtal* (Keraman, n.d.), 182; Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, 4th ed. (Beirut, 1404/1983), XLIV, 284.

[29]) The compositions are called *maqātil*. On the development of *maqātil* literature, see my doctoral dissertation: Khalid Sindawi, *The Maqātil*, Ph. D. Thesis, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan, 2000 (in Hebrew); See also Sebastian Günther, "Maqātil Literature in Medieval Islam," *JAL* 25 (1994), 192–212.

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grimage site, works concerning the pilgrimage to Ḥusayn's tomb were written, dealing with the ceremonies conducted there.[30] The Euphrates plays an important role in these ceremonies: every pilgrim must purify himself before beginning the *ziyāra* rites at the tomb.

We should point out that according to Islamic tradition Ḥusayn was prevented by the Umayyad soldiers from drinking water from the Euphrates and was killed in a state of thirst. Although he begged his enemies to enable him to drink, they prevented him from doing so and mocked him, telling him that he would die of thirst and taste the pain of a slow death.[31]

After Ḥusayn's death the Euphrates gradually took on an increasing importance among Shīʿīs, who ascribed to it many virtues, in general and in comparison to other rivers. Among these virtues are the following: it is one of the four earthly rivers emanating from the Garden of Eden; it is a believing river, in contrast to the Tigris, which is an unbeliever; its water can cure any disease; and if its water is mixed with soil from Karbalāʾ the resulting mud is a cure for any disease.[32] Shīʿī sources contain also, in addition to the details of the river's virtues, tales of miracles related to both ʿAlī and the Euphrates, which will be discussed below.

The Euphrates and the Zamzam Well

For the Shīʿa Karbalāʾ is of great importance as a place of pilgrimage. The site is visited at various times, similarly to the pilgrimage to Mecca. However, the Shīʿī Imāms, and in particular the sixth Imām Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq, claim that the pilgrimage to Ḥusayn's tomb in Karbalāʾ is worth a thousand pilgrimages to Mecca. Karbalāʾ thus enjoys a status superior to that of city of the Kaʿba.[33] And if next to the Kaʿba there is a well, Zamzam, next to Karbalāʾ one finds the Euphrates River, the many virtues of

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[30]) For example, see al-Shaykh al-Mufīd (Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. al-Nuʿmān), *Kitāb al-mazār* (Qumm, 1413/1992); Ibn Qulawayh, *Kāmil al-ziyārāt*; Muḥammad b. ʿAlī al-Shajarī, *Faḍl ziyārāt al-Ḥusayn*, ed. Aḥmad al-Ḥusaynī (Qumm, n.d.).

[31]) Abū Mikhnaf (Lūṭ b. Yaḥyā), *Maqtal al-Ḥusayn*, ed. ʿUmar Abū l-Naṣr (Beirut, 1971), 94. It should be noted that Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī's thirst and his being prevented from drinking water became a motif in Shīʿī *maqātil* literature. For details on this motif, see Sindawi, *Maqātil*, 211–14.

[32]) See, for example, al-Shajarī, *Faḍl*, 89–90; al-Qummī, *Mafātīḥ*, 507–508.

[33]) See al-Majlisī, *Biḥār*, XCVIII, 110.

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which exceed those of the former. The Shīʿīs explain this by means of the following story:

One day the waters of Zamzam boasted that they were the best and most excellent on earth. This made God angry. He turned the formerly sweet water brackish and granted the status that Zamzam previously enjoyed to the Euphrates. That is why the literature concerning the virtues of Zamzam contains descriptions very similar, in content as well as in form, to works describing the virtues of the Euphrates.

In a tradition ascribed to the Imām al-Bāqir, he is quoted as saying:

> God created the land of Karbalāʾ 24,000 years before He created the Kaʿba. He made it into a sacred territory, the sanctity of which existed before the creation of man and will continue to exist until God will make it into the preferred place in Paradise and the preferred abode where God will cause the righteous to dwell in Paradise.[34]

Elsewhere al-Ṣādiq is quoted as saying: "Four areas made noise in the days of the Flood. They are: al-Bayt al-maʿmūr,[35] so God raised it, al-Ghariyy,[36] Karbalāʾ and Ṭūs."[37] From this tradition we may conclude that the Shīʿīs ascribe to Karbalāʾ a status equal to that of the Kaʿba, al-Ghariyy, the burial site of ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib, and Tūs, the burial place of the Imām ʿAlī al-Riḍa (d. 203/818), all of which have become holy sites for the Shīʿa.

However, Karbalāʾ is considered particularly sacred because it is on its soil that the Prophet's grandson Ḥusayn was killed so dramatically and ruthlessly. In order to provide legitimacy for this belief of theirs, the Shīʿīs went back many centuries in time, to claim that Karbalāʾ and its environs had been sacred land ever since the Creation, and that it was the area preferred by God Himself, which He will eventually turn into Paradise, into the abode of His saints. It is the place whence God spoke to Noah, and there he and his sons were saved from the deluge; there God also spoke with Moses (Mūsā); prophets and angels have been gathering

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[34]) *Ibid.*

[35]) "The Inhabited House": A house in the seventh heaven visited by Muḥammad during the Miʿrāj or night-journey. It is said to be located immediately above the sacred temple at Mecca. See Thomas Patrick Hughes, *A Dictionary of Islam* (New York, 1885), 35.

[36]) For details on al-Ghariyy see Muḥammad ʿAlī Jaʿfar al-Tamīmī, *Mashhad al-Imām aw madināt al-Najaf* (Najaf, 1955), I, 61–62; Ghiyāth al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Karīm b. Tāwūs, *Farḥat al-Ghariy fī taʿyīn qabr Amīr al-Muʾminīn ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib fī l-Najaf* (Qumm, n.d.), 15–17.

[37]) On Ṭū, see C. E. Bosworth, art. "Ṭūs" in *EI*^{2}, X (2000), 740.

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there since ancient times to mourn over Ḥusayn.[38] Another tradition has al-Ṣādiq saying: "Karbalāʾ and the water of the Euphrates are the first place on the earth that God sanctified and blessed".[39] From this tradition it follows that the sanctification of the Euphrates takes precedence over that of Zamzam. Yet another tradition quotes al-Ṣādiq as saying:

> God, the Blessed and Exalted, preferred some places to others on the earth, and preferred some waters over others on the earth. Some of these places and waters boasted and others did wrong. God punished any water and any land that were not humble. God sent to the Kaʿba the polytheists[40] as punishment, and made the waters of the Zamzam Well salty and unpalatable. But Karbalāʾ and the water of the Euphrates River were the first land and the first waters on the face of the earth that God blessed and sanctified. God said to Karbalāʾ: "Speak about how God preferred you". So the soil of Karbalāʾ and the water of the Euphrates River spoke as follows while other lands and waters boasted about each other. Said Karbalāʾ: "I am God's sacred and blessed land. Healing is to be found in my soil and my water. I do not boast of this. I am humble and subservient and do God's will. I do not gloat before those of less status than myself, but thank God." Then God honored it and increased its status, because it had thanked God for the fact that Ḥusayn would be killed on its soil and buried in its earth together with his men. Abū ʿAbd Allāh (i. e. al-Ṣādiq) adds: "Whosoever shows humility and subservience to God, God raises his status; and whosoever demonstrates pride, God lowers his status".[41]

According to this tradition God initially preferred the Kaʿba over all other places on earth, and the water of Zamzam over all other waters on earth. However, after the Kaʿba and Zamzam boasted God sent the polytheists to the former and made the latter's water salty. As punishment for their pride God transferred the Kaʿba's former status to Karbalāʾ and that of the water of Zamzam to the water of the Euphrates River. These were thus rewarded for their humility and granted virtues exceeding even those of the Kaʿba and Zamzam.

The virtues of Zamzam and its water, as well as the metaphors used to describe it, have in fact often been transferred to the Euphrates.

It would thus appear that the Shīʿī writers compete with the Sunnīs, expressing their preference for the Euphrates over the Zamzam Well for

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[38]) Kanāzīʿ, "Karbalāʾ", 186–7; Akhṭab Khawārizim (al-Muwaffaq b. Aḥmad al-Makkī), *Maqtal al-Ḥusayn* (Najaf, 1948), 17.

[39]) al-Majlisī, *Biḥār*, XCVIII, 110.

[40]) On "Shirk" in Islam see D. Gimaret, art. "Shirk" in *EI*^{2} (Leiden, 1997), 484–86; M. I. Surty, *The Qurʾānic Concept of al-Shirk (Polytheism)* (London, 1982).

[41]) al-Majlisī, *Biḥār*, XCVIII, 110.

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the purpose of uniting the Shīʿīs around the river and the sacred tombs in its vicinity. Another motive for turning the Euphrates into a holy site is economic interest. After all, the pilgrims who come to visit the tombs and immerse themselves in the river need lodging, food, drink and transportation. Supplying all these needs contributes to the area's economic development.

A further tradition quotes al-Ṣādiq as saying: "Whoever comes to the tomb of Ḥusayn on the day of ʿArafa[42] (the ninth day of the month of Dhū l-Ḥijja, on which the pilgrims to Mecca camp at Mt. ʿArafāt, one of the stations on the pilgrims' way), washes in the water of the Euphrates and then goes to the tomb, God gives him for every single step the recompense of having made the pilgrimage to Mecca".[43] In another version of this tradition it is claimed that the recompense is equal to that of someone who participates in the war of the Muslims against the non-Muslims.[44] Here al-Ṣādiq makes the claim that the water of the Euphrates is pure and holy and that pilgrims to the tomb should immerse themselves in it in order to receive their recompense, which for every step they take is equal to the recompense given someone making the pilgrimage to Mecca.

Still another tradition has al-Ṣādiq claiming that anyone visiting Ḥusayn's tomb and bathing in the river sheds all his sins and becomes as innocent as on the day of his birth.[45] A tradition quoting the Imām ʿAlī al-Riḍa[46] maintains that whoever visits Ḥusayn's tomb on the bank of the Euphrates is considered as having visited God sitting on His throne.[47] This tradition in fact places Karbalāʾ and the Euphrates on the same level as the seventh heaven, where the Divine Throne is located.[48] It is as if they were an integral part of heaven itself. Recall also that we previously saw that the Euphrates is considered to be one of the four rivers of the Garden of Eden that are located on earth. The purpose of these traditions is to demonstrate that the sanctity of the Euphrates stems from its having been chosen as such by God.

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[42]) About him see A. J. Wensinck, art. "ʿArafa" in *EI*^{2}, I (Leiden, 1986), 604.

[43]) al-Majlisī, *Biḥār*, XCVIII, 90.

[44]) *Ibid.*, XCVIII, 85.

[45]) *Ibid.*, XCVIII, 90.

[46]) For whom see B. Lewis, art. "ʿAlī al-Riḍa" in *EI*^{2}, I (Leiden, 1986), 399–400.

[47]) al-Majlisī, *Biḥār*, XCVIII, 85.

[48]) On the throne see J. Berque, art. "ʿArsh" in *EI*^{2}, I (Leiden, 1986) 509; ʿAbsī Muḥammad, *Kitāb al-ʿarsh* (Beirut, 1990); C. L. Hurat, J. Sadan, art. "Kursī" in *EI*^{2}, V (Leiden, 1986), 661.

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Miracles Associated with the Euphrates[49]

Shīʿī writers mention three miracles with connections to the Euphrates. These are: the river's embarrassment when forced to flow over Ḥusayn's tomb; the drop in the water level on the orders of ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib; the suicide of Ḥusayn's steed in the river. Each of these miracles casts valuable light on the status of the Euphrates.

The river's Embarrassment When Forced to Flow over Ḥusayn's Tomb

One of the strangest tales connected with the Euphrates is the embarrassment its waters felt when the caliph al-Mutawakkil[50] (r. 233–47/847–61), who was anti-Shīʿī, ordered his men to divert the river's current in the direction of Ḥusayn's tomb and then, in 850, further ordered that the tomb and all the surrounding buildings be destroyed and that the entire area be plowed under and put to agricultural use. He also forbade visitation to the tomb.[51] In fact, the commissioner of police in the area published the following announcement: "Whosoever is caught by Ḥusayn's tomb will be sent to the al-Miṭbaq[52] prison in Baghdad". As a result the people refrained from going there and the tomb and the surrounding area was plowed under and put to agricultural use.[53] Medieval Muslim historians relate that the water of the river refused to flow over the tomb, out of embarrassment *(ḥārat al-miyāh)*, from which one of the

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[49]) The Shīʿi attitude towards the *muʿjiza* is unique in that the Shīʿa ascribes the ability to perform *muʿjizāt* to Imāms as well as to prophets. For details see M. A. Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shīʿism: The sources of Esotericism in Islam*, trans. David David Streight (New York, 1994), 91; al-Shaykh al-Mufīd, *Awāʾil al-maqalāt fī l-madhāhib wa-l-mukhtārāt* (Tabriz, 1371/1951), 40–41, trans. M. J. McDermott, *The Theology of al-Shaikh al-Mufīd* (Beirut, 1978), 112.

[50]) For whom see H. Kennedy, art. "al-Mutawakkil ʿAlā Allāh" in *EI*^{2}, VII (Leiden, 1993), 777–78.

[51]) Jalāl al-Dīn b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Suyūti, *Tārīkh al-khulafāʾ* (Beirut, 1997), 407.

[52]) The prison was built by the second ʿAbbāsid caliph, Abū Jaʿfar al-Manṣūr (ruled 754–75 C. E.), between the two city walls of Baghdad. For details see ʿAbd al-Jabbār al-Jūmard, *Ḥārūn al-Rashīd: ḥaqāʾiq ʿan ʿahdihi wa-khilāfatihi* (Beirut, 1999), 242; ʿAbū al-Shālijī, *Mawsuʿat al-ʿadhāb* (Beirut, n.d.), III, 115.

[53]) Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Tabarī, *Tārīkh al-umam wa-l-mulūk* (Beirut, 1988), V, 312.

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names of Ḥusayn's tomb al-Ḥāʾir ("the embarrassed"), is derived. When the water reached the tomb it stopped, divided and flowed around it, so that it was not inundated. The name al-Ḥāʾir[54] for the tomb is in use to this day.[55]

In this tradition the water of the Euphrates performs a miracle by being embarrassed and refusing to flow over Ḥusayn's tomb. The reason for this may be that the Euphrates is considered a sacred river, one of the rivers of Paradise on earth. On the other hand, it may be that the composers of this tradition wanted to say that God mobilized nature – the Euphrates in this case – in order to protest the wrong that was done to the tomb of Ḥusayn, one of the most virtuous of men.

The Drop in the Water Level on the Orders of ʿAlī

Al-Shaykh al-Mufīd in his book *al-Irshād* quotes a tradition passed down by transmitters of traditions relating the following miracle that occurred to ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib:

> One day the water in the imposing[56] Euphrates rose and inundated the entire area. The people were frightened and in their confusion they came to the Prince of the Believers, may he rest in peace. Then ʿAlī rode on the mule[57] of the Messenger of God (may the prayers of Allāh be on him and on his family) and the people came with him until he reached the bank of the Euphrates. Then ʿAlī, may he rest in peace, went down to the river, bathed in its water and prayed alone, while the people gazed at him in wonder. Then he called out so that all heard, stepped toward the river leaning on his stick, struck the water and said: "May the level of your water drop, with Allāh's permission and will". The water level dropped suddenly until the fish at the river's bottom could be seen. The fish greeted ʿAlī ...[58]

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[54]) The grave of Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī has other names as well. They are: *Saḥn al-Ḥusayn, Ḥaram al-Ḥusayn, Jāmiʿ al-Ḥusayn, Masjid al-Ḥusayn, al-Rawḍat al-Ḥusayniyya*, and *al-Ḥaḍra al-Ḥusayniyya*. For details see ʿAbd al-Jawād al-Kalīdār, *Tārīkh Karbalāʾ wa-ḥāʾir al-Ḥusayn* (Najaf, 1418/1997), 73.

[55]) al-Tabarī, *Tārīkh*, IV, 312.

[56]) It is worth noting that the Euphrates *(Furāt)* River is named after the regions through which it flows such as: Furāt al-Kūfa, Furāt al-Karbalāʾ, etc.

[57]) Apparently the reference here is to the prophet Muḥammad's mule, called al-Shahbāʾ, and also al-Duldul. For details see ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. ʿAlī al-Jawzī, *al-Wafā bi-aḥwāl al-Muṣṭafā*, ed. ʿAbd al-Qādi ʿAṭā (Beirut, 1988), 591.

[58]) al-Shaykh al-Mufīd (Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. al-Nuʿmān), *al-Irshād*, 3rd. ed. (Beirut, 1989), 20; al-Faḍl al-Ṭabarsī, *Iʿlām al-warā bi-aʿlām al-hudā*, 3rd ed. (Qumm, 1390/1970), 179.

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In this tradition it is ʿAlī who performs the miracle. At first he bathes in the Euphrates, and then, after he prays, he calls out and strikes the water with his stick. The water level immediately drops, as happened to Moses, who smote the Red Sea, which then split and enabled himself and his people to escape from Pharaoh. The Shīʿī writers thus create a link between ʿAlī and Moses, both of whom are considered exceptional people capable of performing miracles. Moses is a prophet whereas ʿAlī is a *waṣī* (inheritor), the Prophet's heir and an Imām with a prophet-like ability to perform miracles.[59] It is no coincidence that ʿAlī performs this miracle on the Euphrates, a believing, sacred and pure river greatly revered by the Shīʿa. The first greet ʿAlī, who understands what they say. For ʿAlī understood the language of animals,[60] like King Solomon.

The Suicide of Ḥusayn's Steed in the River[61]

After Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī was killed in the battle of Karbalāʾ:

> His horse wandered around neighing and examining the bodies of the dead one by one, until it reached the body of Ḥusayn. Then it began to dip its head in the blood, striking the earth with its front hooves and neighing so loudly that it was heard in the nearby desert. The commander of the Umayyad army, ʿUmar b. Saʿd (d. 67/686) asked that the horse be brought to him. His men went to catch it, but the horse resisted. It kicked with its front and back legs in protest, killing many of the Umayyad men and horses. When ʿUmar b. Saʿd saw that he could not be caught he shouted to his soldiers: "Leave it

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[59]) On the similarity of the characteristics between the prophet and the Imām, and especially the miracles that they perform, see for example: M. M. Asher, "The Qurʾān Commentary Ascribed to Imām Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī", *JSAI* 24 (2000), 366–68; and on the knowledge of the Imām, equal to the knowledge of the Prophet, see Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan b. Farrūkh al-Saffār al-Qummī, *Basāʾr al-darajāt fī faḍāʾil āl Muḥammad* (Tabriz, 1380/1960), 109 no. 2. Likewise, it should be noted that there is no difference between performance of miracles by Imāms and prophets. For details see Judith Loebenstein, "Miracles in Šīʿī Thought: A Case Study of the Miracle attributed to Imām Ǧaʿfar al-Ṣādiq," *Arabica* 2 (2003), 242.

[60]) On the popular levels of the Shiʿa, ʿAlī (like the rest of the Shīʿī Imāms) is fluent in all languages, including the languages of the animals and plants, just as are the prophets. For details see Loebenstein, "Miracles in Šīʿī Thought," 217–18, 233–34; Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide*, 93; al-Shaykh al-Mufīd, *Awāʾil*, 93.

[61]) Abū Mikhnaf, *Maqtal*, 48.

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> alone. Let us see what it intends to do". Ḥusayn's horse then went into the women's tent and informed them that his rider was killed. The horse wept tearfully like a human being. Then it left the women's tent, went to the Euphrates, threw itself in the river and took its own life.[62]

Abū Mikhnaf (Lūṭ b. Yaḥyā, d. 158/774),[63] a historian who composed a book about the killing of Ḥusayn *(Maqtal al-Ḥusayn)*, wrote there this horse will appear again at the end of time together with the Mahdī,[64] with Ḥusayn riding on its back.[65] This tradition is mentioned by no one except Abū Mikhnaf, and would thus appear to have been invented by him, or by someone else who ascribed it to him.

The purpose of this tradition is to demonstrate that the horse of the Messenger of God fights alongside its master and behaves like a human being: it brings the news of the death of Ḥusayn to the women's tent, commits suicide in the river and disappears. It will spend the interval of its death *(barzakh)*[66] until the resurrection in the Euphrates, and will be revived together with Ḥusayn at the end of time *(ākhir al-zamān)*, when Ḥusayn will ride it again in his war against his enemies, similarly to the "beast of the earth" *(dābbat al-arḍ)*[67] on which the Mahdī (the twelfth Imām, Muḥammad al-Mahdī, who disappeared in Sāmarrāʾ, some 100 kilometers north of Baghdad, in 261/874) will ride after his return *(rajʿa)* to this world to bring the message of redemption, punish the enemies of the Shīʿa, and "fill the land with justice just as before it was filled with iniquity."

In this tradition the Euphrates River serves as a refuge in which Ḥusayn's horse spends his *barzakh* interval, waiting for its resurrection at the End of Time. It is as if the horse purposely picked this river to throw itself into, out of an awareness of its sanctity and value, and as if it knew

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[62]) *Ibid.*

[63]) For whom see H.A.R. Gibb, art. "Abū Mikhnaf" in *EI²*, I (Leiden, 1986), 140; Ursula Sezgin, *Abū Miḫnaf* (Leiden, 1977); Sindawi, "The Maqātil", 59–68.

[64]) The Mahdī in Twelver Shīʿism is th twelfth Imām, who vanished in Samarrāʾ in 874. He is known as Muḥammad al-Ḥujja or *al-Muntaẓar* or *al-Qāʾim*, or *Ṣāḥib al-Zamā*n. For details about him see J. G. J. Ter Haar, art. "Muḥammad al-Ḳāʾim" in *EI²*, VII (Leiden, 1993), 443; J. M. Hussain, *The Occultation of the Twelfth Imam: A Historical Background* (London, 1982); A. A. Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism: The Idea of the Mahdi in Twelver Shīʿism* (Albany, 1981).

[65]) Abū Mikhnaf, *Maqtal*, 48.

[66]) For details about him see B. Carra De Vaux, art. "Barzakh" in *EI²*, I (Leiden, 1986), 1071–72.

[67]) For details see A. Abel, art. "Dābba" in *EI²*, II (Leiden, 1991), 71.

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that it would provide it with sanctuary until it was resurrected together with its master, Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī.

The Virtues of the Euphrates River in Shīʿī Literature

Ibn Qulawayh dedicated the thirteenth chapter of his *Kāmil al-ziyārāt* to the virtues of the Euphrates, drinking its water and bathing in it as part of the rites of pilgrimage to the tomb of Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī.[68] Among these virtues is the fact that it is one of the rivers of the Garden of Eden, as are the Nile, Sīḥān and Jīḥān.[69] The Euphrates is thus a sacred river, chosen by God.

When asked about this by one of his supporters, al-Ṣādiq sais: "God created one of His Paradises in the west, and the waters of our Euphrates emanate from that one …"[70]

The water of the Euphrates is master of the waters of this world and the next one. It can heal all manner of diseases and the Shīʿī believers bathe in it for this purpose. Every night an angel descends, carrying with it three measures of the musk of Paradise, which it throws into the river.[71]

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[68]) It should be noted that every Shīʿī believer makes a pilgrimage to Ḥusayn's grave. Purification in the waters of the Euphrates is a prerequisite for the pilgrimage ceremony. The immersion completes the pilgrim's purification. For details see Qummī, *Mafātīḥ*, 474; al-Shajarī, *Faḍl*, 79.

[69]) Ibn Qulawayh, *Kāmil*, 47, 49; al-Majlisī, *Biḥār*, XLVII, 37; al-Mirzā Ḥusayn al-Nūrī, *Mustadrak al-wasāʾil* (Qumm, 1408/1987), X, 227–28, XVII, 25–26; Ibn Babayhi al-Qummī (Muḥammad b. ʿAlī), *al-Khiṣāl*, 2nd ed. (Qumm, 1403/1982), II, 625; Ḥasan b. Shuʿba al-Ḥarranī, *Tuḥaf al-ʿuqūl*, (Qumm, 1403/1982), 113. Most Shīʿī traditions mention the names of the four rivers of the world that originate in Paradise. They are the Nile, the Euphrates, the Sīḥūn (located in India) and the Jīḥūn (in the Balkh region of Khurāsān. For details see al-Nūrī, *Mustadrak*, XVII, 26. Other traditions add to the list the Tigris see *ibid.*, X, 227. It should be noted that there is some uncertainty in Shīʿī tradition regarding the names of the rivers Sīḥūn and Jīḥūn. Some of the traditions mistakenly refer to them as Sīḥān and Jīḥān. For details see al-Majlisī, *Biḥār*, LVII, 35. 47, 254. al-Majlisī comments on this and notes that the two names are two different rivers, the Sīḥūn and Jīḥūn being larger rivers.

[70]) It should be noted that the Shīʿī Imāms refer to the Euphrates when it is owned by the Shīʿa by making use of the suffix of affinity "ī". For details see al-Majlisī, *Biḥār*, XXV, 371; al-Ṣaffār, *Baṣāʾir al-darajāt*, 400.

[71]) al-Majlisī, *Biḥār*, VI, 289; LVIII, 51; Muḥammad b. Yaʿqūb b. Isḥāq al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī*, 4th ed. (Tehran, 1365/1945), III, 246.

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Every day seven drops from Paradise fall into the Euphrates, in whose course flow two waterspouts from Paradise.[72] Every new-born child whose gums are rubbed with Euphrates water[73] becomes a supporter of the *Ahl al-bayt*.[74] In this connection it is told that when the eighth Imām, ʿAlī al-Riḍa, was born in the city of Medina, his father the seventh Imām, Mūsā al-Kāẓim[75] (d. 183/799), rubbed his gums with water from the far-off Euphrates. In the opinion of al-Arbillī the Imām al-Kāẓim may have kept some Euphrates water in his home as a charm, or he may perhaps have miraculously caused water from the Euphrates to appear in his home immediately after his son's birth. Al-Arbillī adds that one should not wonder at this, since Imāms are capable of performing miracles anytime, anywhere.[76]

On the matter of the Euphrates' creation Shīʿī literature explains that God sent the angel Gabriel with orders to scratch eight rivers on the earth with his thumb. One of these rivers is the Euphrates.[77]

Another virtue of the Euphrates is that it is a believing river, as is the Nile. God sanctified and blessed it, and its water heals. The water of the Euphrates and the soil of Karbalāʾ spoke together and said that God preferred them to other places and granted them superior virtues and status because of their humility. God thanked the water of the Euphrates and made it taste sweet. The Euphrates and the soil of Krbalāʾ are safe, sacred and blessed, and were so already 24,000 years before God created the

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[72]) al-Mufīd, *al-Mazār*, 15, 17; al-Ḥurr al-ʿĀmilī (Muḥammad, b. al-Ḥasan b. ʿAlī), *Wasāʾil al-shīʿa* (Qumm, 1409/1988), iV, 14; XXV, 268; Ibn Qulawayh, *Kāmil*, 49; al-Nūrī, *Mustadrak*, XVII, 22; al-Majlisī, *Biḥār*, XCVII, 230; Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭūsī, *Tahdhīb al-aḥkām*, 4th ed. (Tehran, AH 1365), VI, 38.

[73]) al-Majlisī, *Biḥār*, XCVII, 230; XCIX, 244; Ibn Qulawayh, *Kāmil*, 49; al-Shaykh al-Mufīd (Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. al-Nuʿmān), *al-Muqniʿa* (Qumm, 1433/1922), 521.

[74]) For details on *Ahl al-Bayt* see M. Sharon, "*Ahl al-Bayt* – People of the House," *JSAI* 8 (1986), 69–184.

[75]) For whom see E. Kohlberg, art. "Mūsa al-Kāẓim" in *EI*^{2}, VII (Leiden, 1993), 645–48.

[76]) ʿAlī b. ʿĪsī al-Irbillī, *Kashf al-ghumma fī maʿrifat al-aʾimma* (Tabriz, 1381/1961), II, 298.

[77]) The other rivers are: the Sīḥān and Jīḥān in the area of Balkh, al-Khushuʿ in the area of Shāsh, Mihrān in India, the Nile in Egypt, and the Tigris and the Euphrates in Iraq. For details see Majlisī, *Biḥār*, LVII, 73, Ibn Babawayhi al-Qummī, *Khiṣal*, I, 291; al-ʿĀmilī, *Wasāʾil al-shīʿa*, IX, 430; Ibn Babawayhi al-Qummī (Muḥammad b. ʿAlī b. al-Ḥusayn), *Man lā yaḥḍuruhu al-faqīh*, 3rd ed. (Qumm, 1413/1888), II, 45.

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Kaʿba and the water of Zamzam. On the Day of Judgment the earth will shudder, but God will raise Karbalāʾ and the Euphrates up to become an inseparable part of Paradise, where they will shine like the stars, with a light that will swamp the eyes of those looking at them in Paradise.[78]

Whoever bathes in the Euphrates and then walks over to Ḥusayn's tomb will receive with every step a recompense from God that is equal to that of a pilgrimage to Mecca.[79] Whoever does not bathe in the Euphrates will never be blessed.[80] Some traditions link the sanctity of the Euphrates to the prophet Noah. One tradition claims that Noah's ark anchored at the Euphrates after the deluge because of its sanctity.[81]

According to Shīʿī literature the dowry brought by the Prophet's daughter Fāṭima al-Zahrāʾ[82] (d. 12/633) when she married ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib consisted of one-fifth of this world, a third of Paradise and four earthly rivers: the Euphrates, the Nile, Nahrawān and Balakh.[83]

Such popular elements in the veneration of the Euphrates are attacked by the well-known anti-Shīʿī modern Iraqi scholar al-Sāmarrāʾī, who had this to say about the fact that the Shīʿīs considered the Euphrates more sacred than Zamzam: "This is nothing but heresy by which the Shīʿīs are trying to turn pilgrims away from Mecca and the water of Zamzam in favor of Karbalāʾ and the water of the Euphrates, for the purpose of destroying the Muslim religion".[84]

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[78]) al-Mufīd, *Mazār*, 34–35; al-ʿĀmilī, *Wasāʾil al-shīʿa*, X, 403; al-Ḥusayn al-Buraqī al-Najafī, *al-Durra al-bahiyya fī faḍl Karbalāʾ wa-turbatihā al-dhakiyya*, ed. ʿAlī Ḥāshimī al-Khaṭṭāb (Najaf, n.d.), 11–12.

[79]) al-Shajarī, *Faḍl*, 79.

[80]) al-ʿĀmilī, *Wasāʾil al-shīʿa*, V, 259; al-Nūrī, *Mustadrak*, II, 523; al-Majlisī, *Biḥār*, XCVII, 227; XCVII, 401.

[81]) al-Majlisī, *Biḥār*, XI, 333; XCVII, 381; al-Nūrī, *Mustadrak*, III, 401; Muḥammad b. Masʿūd b. ʿAyāshī, *Tafsīr al-ʿAyāshī*, Hāshim al-Rasūlī al-Maḥāllatī (Tehran, 1830/1960), II, 146, 149. Here the purpose of the Shīʿa is to emphasize that the Euphrates and its environs in southern Iraq has been a holy place since the days of the prophet Noah. In this way the Shīʿīs strive to legitimize their belief that the Euphrates has been a holy river since ancient times.

[82]) For whom see L. Veccia Vaglieri, art. "Fāṭima" in *EI*², X (Leiden, 1999), 841–50.

[83]) al-Nūrī, *Mustadrak*, XVII, 25; XIV, 241; Muḥammad b. Shahrā Shūb al-Mazandarānī, *al-Manāqib* (Qumm, 1379/1959), III, 351; Muḥammad b. Jarīr b. Rustum al-Ṭabarī, *Dālāʾil al-imāma* (Qumm, 1383/1963), 18.

[84]) ʿAbd al-Munʿim al-Sāmarrāʾī, *al-Rāfiḍa wa-tafḍīl ziyārat qabr al-Ḥusayn ʿalā ḥajj bayt Allāh* (XXXX, 1991), 6.

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The Euphrates in Imāmī Shīʿī Qurʾānic Exegesis

Among Shīʿī exegetes and jurists the common, and perhaps most effective, method for the establishment of a belief or rite that are not mentioned explicitly in the Qurʾān is to find some hint of it in the Islamic scripture, since it is taken to be the undoubted word of God. However, it is quite difficult to apply this method for matters which have no mention at all in the Qurʾān, in which case considerable talents of exegesis and analogy have to be brought to bear.

In this respect the Euphrates presents a complex problem, since the exegetes were aware that, on the one hand, one could not depend on the sayings of the Imāms as the sole authority on which to base the rite, but that, on the other hand, it was difficult to point to any certain hint in the Qurʾān. It would appear that they feared lest this silence concerning the Euphrates undermine the belief on which they were based, forcing them to rely on *ḥadīth* in order to explain Qurʾānic verses that supposedly referred to the Euphrates. In other words, the process whereby the veneration of the Euphrates was adopted by the Shīʿa began with the *ḥadīth*, not the Qurʾān.

Using this method, most Shīʿī exegetes came to the conclusion that the Qurʾān does indeed contain hints concerning the Euphrates and the rites associated with it. Two verses in particular are held by Shīʿīs to refer to the Euphrates. One is the verse: "And we made the son of Mary and his mother a portent, and we gave them refuge on a height, a place of flocks *(qarār)* and water-springs *(maʿīn)*",[85] and the second: "And when he reached it, he was called from the right side of the valley *(wādī)* in the blessed field, from the tree: O Moses! Lo! I, even I am Allah, the Lord of the worlds".[86]

In the first verse God speaks about Mary and her son Jesus and the fact that He found a safe place for them that is high and has water. Shīʿī exegetes have provided many different explanations as to the identity of this place, including the city of al-Ramla, Damascus, Egypt, the Temple of Jerusalem, and the city of al-Ḥīra in Iraq. The word *qarār* in this verse has been taken to refer to the mosque of al-Kūfa, not to "flocks", with the word *maʿīn* being explained as referring to one particular source of water, the Euphrates.[87]

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[85]) Qurʾān XXIII, 50, English trans. M. Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Qurʾān* (New York, 2000), 314.

[86]) Qurʾān XXVIII, 30; Pickthall, *Meaning*, 384.

[87]) al-Faḍl b. Ḥasan al-Ṭabarsī, *Majmaʿ al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān* (Beirut, 1995), VII, 192–93.

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While other explanations have also been offered, what interests us here is the fact that the Shīʿī exegetes explained the word *maʿīn* as referring to the Euphrates, on whose bank God found a refuge for Mary and Jesus near sweet waters. In other words, the sweet waters of the Euphrates river are holy, and are meant for special, chosen people.

In contrast, Sunnī (orthodox) exegetes interpret the word *maʿīn* as referring to a river in Damascus or as having the meaning of "running water".[88] They make no mention at all of the Euphrates, thus providing evidence for the claim made at the beginning of this paper, that Shīʿī commentators purposely sought an interpretation of the Qurʾānic text in which the Euphrates River could be inserted so as to confirm its status as a sacred river.

Concerning the second verse al-Ṣādiq says[89] that the word *wādī* ("valley") refers to the Euphrates.[90] This interpretation is unsupported by any other Shīʿī exegesis, but clearly al-Ṣādiq tries here to give the word a meaning that would enable him to claim a status of sanctity for the river.

It may be worth pointing out here that Imāmī Shīʿīs insist that the Qurʾān is full of references to Shīʿī doctrine, its history, its articles of faith and its holy places. However, since in most cases the text contains no explicit references, Shīʿī exegetes have had to overcome this obstacle. This they did in one of three ways. First of all, they claimed that it is the Qurʾān's way to only hint at things, and that it is the task of the exegete to expose their true meaning; secondly, they claimed that the existing Qurʾānic text has been falsified by purposely deleting references to the Shīʿīs and their faith; thirdly, they claimed that the Qurʾān teaches only the principles, leaving the details to tradition.[91]

To conclude, although the Qurʾān does not refer explicitly to the Euphrates River, it may be claimed to hint at it, if we accept the Shīʿī interpretation of the two verses adduced above. Shīʿī exegetes thus claimed to

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88) Ibn Kathīr, for example, interprets the word as "as fountain of flowing water." See Ibn Kathīr, ʿImād al-Dīn ʾIsmāʿīl, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm* (Cairo, n. d.), III, 388; Abū Ṭāhir b. Yaʿqūb al-Fayrūzabādī, *Tanwīr al-miqbās min Tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās* (Cairo, n. d.), 326.

89) It should be noted that in the māmī commentary tradition not every one has the authority to interpret the Qurʾān; this authority is the exclusive preverse of ʿAlī and his Imām descendants. For details see Meir M. Bar-Asher, "Scripture and Exegesis in Early Imāmī Shīʿism", Ph. D. thesis (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1991), 89–94 (in Hebrew).

90) Ibn Qulawayh, *Kāmil*, 49.

91) Bar-Asher, *Issues*, 87–89.

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have demonstrated the originality of the Shīʿī faith, which they believed to go back to very early times. Their approach is consistent with the fact that as far as we know the Euphrates was not a cult site in pagan times.

Conclusion

Throughout the preceding discussion we have stressed the popular and legendary motifs constituting the major part of the discussion about the developing sanctity of the Euphrates. The Euphrates gradually became sacred after Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī was killed and buried nearby. Its sanctity may have been affected by Jewish and/or Christian or Indian tales.

The Shīʿīs assimilated these tales and then used them for their own purposes. This did not prevent the continued existence and further development of additional popular and legendary motifs, which in the end caused the Euphrates to become the object of unofficial veneration, which it maintains to this day among Imāmī Shʿīs, for whom these motifs represent a historical truth no different than any other fact of history. Today scarcely any objection to the cult of the Euphrates can be discerned, perhaps out of fear lest this could lead to doubts concerning other stories accepted by Shīʿīs, such as Noah's pilgrimage to Ḥusayn's tomb, the pilgrimage of the angels to the same tomb, etc. Furthermore, the whole affair is an important part of Shīʿī history and contributes to an understanding of more general issues going beyond the matter of the Euphrates itself, such as how the area of Karbalāʾ and Najaf became holy for the Shīʿīs at an early stage.

The traditions cited throughout this paper are of course not uncontroversial, and their authenticity has been seriously doubted. But that is a matter for a different discussion, since here our concern is with the development of popular spiritual tradition. Most of these traditions have become so accepted among Shīʿīs and have been quoted so often that they have in fact become an integral part of Shīʿī beliefs to this very day.

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